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Parsing *Parsifal*: Wagner's Erotic *Kunstreligion*

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The redemption of the erotic lies at the heart of every viable social order.
Roger Scruton, 2010¹

Richard Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*, prophesises redemption through the pure fool made wise through compassion ("Durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor"). But how does compassion figure into this redemption? And how do we make sense of its sexual elements? Most importantly, how does this redemption impact the Knights of the Holy Grail? These questions have traditionally been addressed through discussions of *Parsifal*'s main themes of sexual desire and religion. This is clearly seen in William Kinderman and Katherine Syer's *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, which features separate chapters on sexuality and religion. While these chapters establish the importance of these two elements, they also reveal a significant division: the two topics have been explored separately from one another. Although narrow focus on one topic is an acceptable approach, especially for introductory chapters, it can generate problems when trying to construct an overall image of the work. This has resulted in certain interpretations that completely neglect one or the other. In this article, I examine the importance of these two themes for understanding *Parsifal*, and how they have influenced its reception. In particular, my analysis will focus on how a narrow focus can generate incomplete explanations. To address this, I draw on Roger Scruton's philosophy to investigate Wagner's treatment of *érōs* and *agape*. In doing so, I present a new exegesis that highlights *Parsifal* as the *Bühnenweihfestspiel*—stage-consecrating festival play—that concluded Wagner's operatic oeuvre.

James M. McGlathery's chapter in *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal* uncovers the roots of *Parsifal*'s erotic elements. Wagner's *Parsifal* has two historical precedents: Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and

¹ Roger Scruton, *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures 2010* (London: Continuum, 2012), 102.

Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*.² Chrétien's *Perceval* is a courtly romance that follows the progression of the titular Perceval. Although the story is ostensibly about knighthood and the Grail, Perceval—who is largely clueless about sexuality—has also been encouraged to explore sexual desire. He has multiple romantic engagements with various women, but his focus ultimately turns towards care and compassion rather than sexual passion.³ Indeed, as the plot progresses, Perceval discovers the Grail castle and the sexual dimension of his character disappears in favour of Christian compassion and knightly duty.⁴ Despite that progression, the lacuna of sexuality is filled by the character of Gawain, who upholds a chivalric ideal that integrates erotic love. This is portrayed as an essential ingredient for being a perfect knight.⁵ Although Chrétien's epic was unfinished, it clearly contained a nuanced engagement with its complex subject matter. These ideas are further amplified in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Wolfram fleshes out the sexual story of Gawain (now renamed Gawan) and further valourises it.⁶ Similarly, Parzival engages in much more serious relationships with women, especially Condwiramurs.⁷ Wolfram concludes Chrétien's poem and thus solidifies a moral: passion and erotic love ultimately prevail as important elements of knighthood.⁸ By looking at *Parsifal*'s precedents, we come to appreciate how Wagner has distilled these elements for his own story. Most notably, Kundry is the synthesis of pre-existing female characters, such as Cundrie and Orgeluse.⁹ Similarly, Gawan's story is integrated into Parsifal's to condense its themes into one character. The resulting story is sexually sophisticated with more complicated moral values.

McGlathery's perspective is developed in his book, *Wagner's Operas and Desire*, which tracks the role of sexual desire throughout Wagner's

² James M. McGlathery, "Erotic Love in Chrétien's *Perceval*, Wolfram's *Parzival*, and Wagner's *Parsifal*," in *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2005), 55.

³ *Ibid.*, 59–61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62–64.

⁶ At his most heroic, Gawan liberates hundreds of men and women from Klingsor's forced celibacy, thus bringing erotic love to even more people. See *Ibid.*, 67–68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

operas. He interprets Wagner's *Parsifal* to be a story about the Knights' struggle against sexual desire, personified in the character of Kundry. McGlathery characterises Kundry as being entirely driven by sexual desire, which in turn permeates the whole drama.¹⁰ As such, McGlathery's sexual perspective elucidates how this sexual element is a central concern of the opera. However, while McGlathery cannot be faulted for his intentionally narrow focus on sexuality, one must be careful when developing a more extensive interpretation of *Parsifal*: when addressing the religious elements of the text, McGlathery's purely sexual lens lacks convincing explanatory power. This is particularly evident in his exploration of the final act, where the opera's sexual drama has religious ramifications. Here, the religious elements are simply described, with minimal connection to earlier commentary. In McGlathery's view, Parsifal is able to redeem and replace Amfortas after demonstrating sexual purity.¹¹ Parsifal is "consumed with yearning to fulfil what he believes is his appointed role as savior," but we are not told why Parsifal must take on this messianic role.¹² While his description incorporates these religious elements and elevates the significance of sexuality, he does not explain why this religious context is essential for our understanding of the opera's sexual message. The impact of this religious neglect is emphasised in the final paragraph of the chapter, where McGlathery frames Wagner's *Parsifal* in relation to its predecessors. The primary concern of earlier *Parsifal* stories is presented as religious doubt, in stark contrast with Wagner's *Parsifal*, which emphasises the struggle with desire. Although sexuality was a big component of earlier stories, the main focus was always religious.¹³ This juxtaposition implies a particular dichotomy for McGlathery's interpretation: Wagner's *Parsifal* is presented as being primarily concerned with sexuality, while religious concerns are merely seen as historical artefacts. Of course, McGlathery is correct to examine sexuality, especially in light of the history that his book chapter covers. However, bracketing away the religious concerns creates the impression that Wagner's *Parsifal* can be fully understood in relation to desire. Although sexuality is clearly a significant concern, McGlathery's sexual framework requires further

¹⁰ James M. McGlathery, *Wagner's Operas and Desire* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998), 240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹² *Ibid.*, 260.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 265.

supplementation to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the opera.

By contrast, Ulrike Kienzle's chapter in *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal* examines *Parsifal's* religious elements by considering its compositional history, along with musical analysis. She begins by unpacking Wagner's religious ideas, particularly in relation to Christianity and Buddhism. This is all ultimately mediated through Wagner's interest in Schopenhauer, which redirects his religious contemplation from religious dogma towards compassion. Kienzle therefore highlights compassion as the main focus of the opera, which is presented through a complex religious story.¹⁴ She explores how the 1865 prose sketch of *Parsifal* (then *Parzival*) contained explicit parallels with the story of the Buddha.¹⁵ This idea is gradually integrated with Christian elements, as Wagner adapts the symbols of Christianity such as the Grail and the Spear, as well as elements of the Eucharist.¹⁶ After this initial draft, Wagner returned to *Parsifal* in 1875 and further turned towards Christianity. The revised *Parsifal* draft has a larger emphasis on Christianity, especially the Redeemer. In line with Wagner's conception of *Kunstreligion* ("Religion of Art" or "Art-as-Religion") it aims to rescue religion, especially Christianity, by presenting its message through art.¹⁷ As such, Kienzle argues that music is the fundamental medium of *Parsifal*. She analyses *Parsifal's* musical motifs to describe a story that is fundamentally about Christian redemption, albeit one that is mediated through a Schopenhauerian lens.¹⁸ This chapter astutely identifies the importance of religion in *Parsifal*, which was clearly a central concern throughout its composition. It also points to its complex nature, given the mixture of Christian and Buddhist elements in Wagner's thinking.

¹⁴ Ulrike Kienzle, "Parsifal and Religion: a Christian Music Drama?" in Kinderman and Syer ed., *Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, 86.

¹⁵ Ibid., 102–104.

¹⁶ Ibid., 96.

¹⁷ Ibid., 111. The term "*Kunstreligion*," from the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, was developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher and reflects a unique understanding of art that permeated German society at the time. See Glenn Stanley, "Parsifal: Redemption and *Kunstreligion*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 154.

¹⁸ Kienzle, "Parsifal and Religion," 113–30.

This religious perspective is explored much more significantly in Karol Berger's interpretation of *Parsifal*.¹⁹ His argument is grounded in a formal analysis that views the communion scenes in acts I and III as foundational to the work's ABA' structure. Specifically, formal differences between the two communion scenes establish an overall progression that culminates in the successful communion scene. Berger effectively utilises musical analysis to cleverly frame *Parsifal* as a distinctly religious story where "*eros* is replaced by *agape*."²⁰ Appropriately, the argument for this replacement stems from his analysis of Parsifal's rejection of the flower maidens and Kundry in Act II.²¹ Notably, Berger acknowledges the apparent contradiction of this interaction: on one hand, sexual experience appears indispensable to Parsifal's development, but on the other hand, he ultimately rejects Kundry's sexual advances.²² Unfortunately, Berger does not further interrogate this dilemma, as his subsequent discussion focuses solely on Kundry's theological struggle with redemption and establishes a complete rejection of *érōs*. Rather than engaging with the aforementioned complexity of sexuality, it is instead rejected on purely religious grounds. This renunciation is interpreted as a Schopenhauerian act that gives way to the final act's redemption.²³ From this point, Berger's analysis suffers from neglecting the pertinent problem of sexuality. This concluding section is highly peculiar within the context of the overall chapter. He foregoes a focused exploration of the third act, instead presenting Wagner's general vision of redemption by branching out from *Parsifal* and drawing on his writings and other operas.²⁴ Unusually, the conclusion

¹⁹ Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason: Wagner Contra Nietzsche* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2016), 293–308.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 329–33.

²² *Ibid.*, 333.

²³ *Ibid.*, 334–35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 339–45.

redirects his argument into a lengthy excursion on Wagner's racism and anti-Semitism.²⁵

I argue that Berger's interpretation ultimately leaves a gap in the opera's overall progression and message, an issue that stems from his treatment of sexuality. While his argument cleverly examines the religious teleology of the work, it does not fully account for its sexual elements. His overemphasis on religion and theology subsumes the discussion of sexuality by viewing it in a wholly sinful, negative light. As a result, he underappreciates a pivotal moment of the opera and only peripherally engages with the work's final act. In fact, Berger foregoes his opening immanent structural analysis, instead deriving his conclusions from external sources and Wagner reception. This departure is worth noting because Berger's musical analysis already established the undeniable structural transformation that occurs throughout the opera. The central question, however, is how this transformation occurs, and what that transformation specifically entails. Having established a transformation, he instead proceeds to assume its nature and extrapolate a broader meaning surrounding it. Regardless of one's conclusions surrounding *Parsifal* and Wagner's anti-Semitism, one must at least establish a clear picture of the final act's redemption before drawing parallels to it. Ultimately, Berger's initial argument remains unfinished and deserves to be followed through to its conclusion. Much like McGlathery, whose purely sexual lens inadequately explains redemption, Berger's religious focus misses the full significance of sexuality, which he himself pointed towards. Clearly, a nuanced understanding of both elements is essential to fully understand the work.

Roger Scruton's philosophy is crucial towards attaining an integrated understanding that comprehensively addresses both elements. His philosophy of sex is rooted in a post-Kantian view of humanity that explores the dual nature of our existence; on one hand,

²⁵ Berger discusses Robert Gutman's racist interpretation of *Parsifal* (Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), chapters 15 and 16), wherein sexuality is linked with broader ideas of societal degeneration and racial purity. Although Berger rejects this broadly racist interpretation, he remains open to the work being understood as specifically anti-Semitic. He concludes the chapter by exploring Hitler's relationship with *Parsifal* as a work as well as subsequent Bayreuth productions. Potentially influenced by Hitler's preferences, its Christian elements are allegedly removed in an attempt to downplay Christianity and enable more nationalistic interpretations. See Berger, *Wagner Contra Nietzsche*, 351–57.

we exist as mere animals, and on the other, we are rational beings with a subjective experience.²⁶ To Scruton, these two facts converge in sexual desire—*érōs*. He identifies two main components of sexual desire: embodiment and individualising intentionality.²⁷ Properly understood, sexual desire involves treating the other as an “embodied person.”²⁸ This involves perceiving someone as a subject that is manifested in that body. The body serves as a conduit to their inner self and the actions one undertakes should acknowledge the other’s personhood. This intentionality necessarily recognises the individuality of the person and distinguishes *érōs* from other forms of love. Thus, Scruton maintains *érōs* to be central for redemption, which he views as “a regaining of the sacred in a world where sacrilege is the prevailing danger.”²⁹ In particular, the structure of sexual desire contributes to the sacralisation of humanity. By treating one another as embodied people, our understanding of the world sacralises the physical, empirical realm. Our human interactions take on profound meaning, as we transcend “the world of appetite [and enter] the realm of values.”³⁰

Scruton’s conception of *érōs* leads to a particular vision of *agape*, which is the love shared between God and humanity. For Scruton, God, and therefore *agape*, can only be manifested through incarnation; in other words, through our physical interactions with one another.³¹ This humanising of *agape* distinguishes him from other philosophers, particularly Plato.³² To Plato, *érōs* is a distracting impulse that must be overcome because it simply points at a deeper spiritual truth: only *agape* can truly bring the closure *érōs* yearns for.³³ Crucially, Scruton explicitly rejects this Platonic view, maintaining that each type of love requires the other. He states that “A society based on *agape* ... will not

²⁶ Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 216.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁹ Roger Scruton, *Death-devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 182.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

³¹ Scruton, *Face of God*, 172–75.

³² Fiona Ellis, “Scruton’s Wagner on God, Salvation, and Eros,” *British Journal Of Aesthetics* 50, no. 2 (2010): 186.

³³ Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, 216.

reproduce itself,” while recognising that an objectified *éros* that neglects interpersonal relations will debase and deface the society.³⁴

This mutual dependence enables Scruton to construct a more complex picture of sexuality and religion, one that accounts for their various imperfect and idealised instantiations. On one hand, an objectified *éros* is the kind that neglects the importance of embodiment and intentionality. It is merely focused on physical attraction, with no regard for the other’s embodied subjectivity. By contrast, a properly balanced sexuality includes these factors and ultimately sacralises society. This enables Scruton’s complex picture of religion. As outlined above, traditional notions of *agape* have a natural tendency to dismiss the physical world as inessential. Instead, Scruton recognises that the physical world is a necessary medium for reaching the transcendent, something we see manifested in *éros*. Thus, Scruton effectively demonstrates the complex natures and interdependence of *éros* and *agape*. While they can both be misunderstood and abused, Scruton offers a way for them to be properly balanced and synthesised.

I argue that Scruton’s philosophy offers an indispensable framework for fully understanding Wagner’s *Parsifal*. Specifically, the relationship between *éros* and *agape* reflects the underlying dynamic of the opera, while their synthesis is vital for its ultimate message. By utilising Scruton’s philosophical framework, a new light is cast on the musical and dramatic ideas of McGlathery, Kienzle, and Berger. My renewed interpretation unifies their disparate conclusions, especially in relation to the final act. This has significant implications for our understanding of *Parsifal*’s vision of redemption and how this relates to Wagner’s other works.

Grasping *Parsifal*’s full message requires a particular understanding of the opera, which is established through the Prelude to Act I. The Prelude inducts the listener into Wagner’s musical landscape with side-by-side presentations of musical motifs that are foundational for the entire work.³⁵ It begins with the Communion theme, which immediately creates Christian connections. After this theme is introduced, the Grail motif enters, featuring the “Dresden Amen.”³⁶ Wagner follows the Church in viewing the Grail as a holy object with

³⁴ Scruton, *Face of God*, 112–15.

³⁵ Berger, *Wagner Contra Nietzsche*, 296.

³⁶ Kienzle, “*Parsifal* and Religion,” 113.

a direct connection to Jesus Christ.³⁷ This is in contradistinction to earlier versions in which the Grail was a nondescript “magic stone” with no explicitly Christian connections.³⁸ Importantly, Berger identifies how the Prelude’s music is central to the two Communion scenes in Act I and III, which act as pillars for the ABA’ structure of the whole opera.³⁹ The Prelude is therefore “retrospectively experienced as an anticipation” of the Communion scene. In his view, the entire opera is framed as a Eucharist in which the audience is involved.⁴⁰ It is therefore notable that the Prelude concludes with the Communion theme transforming into the *Heilandsklage* motif: the Saviour’s lament.⁴¹ However, despite these Christian elements, *Parsifal* is not a strictly Christian work. This is supported by the elements of other religions that permeate the work: the Buddhist elements of Kundry’s reincarnation and the theme of compassion.⁴² Indeed, Wagner’s willingness to mix religious elements aligns with his thoughts on religion and art: “it is reserved for Art to save the spirit of religion... revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation.”⁴³ Thus, while the opera invokes Christian ideas, they should not be taken at face value. Although the Prelude introduces us to the problems of the opera and its search for resolution, the opera must be understood on a deeper level. As the epitome of *Kunstreligion*, it is essential to experience the complete work to fully understand *Parsifal*’s message.

The primary dilemma of the opera occurs between Klingsor and the Knights of the Holy Grail in relation to *érōs* and *agape*. The Knights are a purely *agape*-based community who have rejected all forms of sexual contact in service of their religious devotion. However, properly understood, chastity is not an end in itself, but rather a means for developing sexual maturity. Scruton argues that chastity—as a public policy—should be used to ensure that one

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

³⁸ Anthony Winterbourne, *A Pagan Spoiled: Sex and Character in Wagner’s Parsifal* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 51.

³⁹ Berger, *Wagner Contra Nietzsche*, 293.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 307.

⁴¹ Kienzle, “*Parsifal* and Religion,” 116–18.

⁴² Ibid., 95.

⁴³ Richard Wagner, “Religion and Art” in *Prose Works Volume 6: Religion and Art*, Trans. William Ashton Ellis (St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1972), 213.

ultimately develops a sexuality that is not only fixated on the body, but also recognises the “interpersonal project” of desire.⁴⁴ Applying this to *Parsifal* explains why the Knights’ myopic chastity, by simply rejecting the body, eventually creates a crisis through its antithesis: Klingsor, an existential threat who emerges from the community itself and reflects its unsustainability. He epitomises the fundamentally dual nature of sexual desire described by Scruton’s philosophy: Klingsor castrates himself due to his rampant sexuality, but his subsequent inability to experience arousal leads to his rejection from the Knights. While Klingsor’s castration demonstrates his objectifying attitude towards the physical body, the root of his sexual issues is deeper: his problem is not merely physical but also spiritual. To reflect this, Wagner actually expanded the role of Klingsor in his *Parsifal* to focus the drama on the sexual encounter.⁴⁵ Notably, Wagner’s Klingsor forces interactions that are impersonal and devoid of interpersonal meaning. Through his misguided rejection of sexuality and his evil actions, Klingsor comes to represent a purely physical, objectified sexuality that neglects subjectivity. To understand the full significance of this, it is useful to explore Klingsor’s relationship with magic. In Scruton’s view, Wagner treats magic as a symbol that distils the processes and events of real life down into moments where they occur all at once.⁴⁶ When applied here, Klingsor’s “evil magic” becomes the embodiment of the Knights’ inherent flaws and unsustainability. Rather than a mere external threat, Klingsor represents the chronic danger that threatens to corrupt them. He demonstrates how their neglect of the body ultimately undermines the community, eventually leading to the Spear’s theft and Amfortas’s wound. Thus, the ideological tension between Klingsor and the Knights effectively dramatises the issues associated with misguided *érōs* and pure *agape*.

The full religious significance of this sexual dilemma is distilled through the character of Amfortas. Amfortas’s dilemma mirrors the existential dichotomy established with Klingsor: while Amfortas has a

⁴⁴ Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, 341–42.

⁴⁵ In the original *Parsifal* stories, Klingsor schemed to deprive other people of sexual intimacy. In contrast, Wagner’s Klingsor does the opposite, terrorising the Knights by tempting them into sexual interactions, thereby rendering them impure. See McGlathery, “Erotic Love,” 76.

⁴⁶ Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 277.

physical wound that does not heal, his more significant pain comes from his psychological shame as he feels inadequate to lead the Knights due to his sexual sin. Crucially, the Knights are ill-equipped to help him. Their attempts to heal his wound only target his physical problem (to no avail) and, contrary to Titurel's claim, Amfortas does not find respite through the Grail. Notably, at no point in the opera does the Grail lose its power; ironically, it is precisely the life-providing power of the Grail that prolongs Amfortas's torment.⁴⁷ Yearning for resolution through death, Amfortas abstains from the Grail ceremony and causes the Knights' degeneration. Unable to address Klingsor's twisted *érôs*, Amfortas's unsolvable state highlights the society's insufficient *agape*-based paradigm: it offers no redemption or future. This is reinforced through Amfortas's lament from Act I, which establishes important symbolic and structural ideas. The appearance of the *Heilandsklage* from the Prelude creates parallels with Christ, especially because the same spear stabbed both in the same area.⁴⁸ More significantly, Amfortas's lament creates a formal interruption, disrupting the arch structure of the Act I Communion scene. This is heard through its lack of "regular phrasing, stable tonality and patterns of motivic contrast repetition," features which dominate the surrounding music.⁴⁹ Thus, Amfortas's lament creates a structural problem in the form of an interrupted religious ceremony. Beyond being a merely personal problem, the Knights' dilemma develops into an existential religious crisis in need of a solution.

Parsifal appears to be the solution to this dialectical dilemma, but he is significantly unprepared. This is established through two scenes that highlight the Kantian dual nature of existence, and Parsifal's ignorance of it. Parsifal is first introduced after he senselessly kills a Swan. Gurnemanz chastises Parsifal for his wanton violence by informing him of the Swan's sacred status. Later, after Parsifal fails to acknowledge the Communion scene he has just witnessed, Gurnemanz calls him a "gander" that should go "search for goose." As a metaphor for sexual behaviour, Gurnemanz's delineation between wild geese and "our Swans" highlights Scruton's distinction between humans as animals and persons. The Swans are valued above wild animals in the same way that proper sexuality distinguishes animals from humans by recognising the subjective element of

⁴⁷ Winterbourne, *Pagan Spoiled*, 56–57.

⁴⁸ Kienzle, "Parsifal and Religion," 121–22.

⁴⁹ Berger, *Wagner Contra Nietzsche*, 296.

humanity: personhood. Although Parsifal suggests some level of empathy by clutching his heart, he is ultimately rendered speechless. His inability to properly articulate these feelings reveals his lack of knowledge and self-consciousness.⁵⁰ Rejected from the religious community, Parsifal's insufficient understanding of subjectivity has relegated him to the status of a mere animal. Thus, Scruton's framework enables us to understand the full extent of Parsifal's insufficiency, which is a deeply human problem. This perspective diverges from traditional readings of these scenes, which view the Swan's treatment as a reflection of Wagner's vegetarianism.⁵¹ While these scenes portray the importance of animals and the Buddhist idea of all beings having equal consciousness, they still lack the essential ingredients for Parsifal's enlightenment; rather than complete his journey, this incident merely catalyses it.

Parsifal's enlightenment requires maturing through his first experience of *éros*. This occurs in Act II through his pivotal erotic encounter in Klingsor's domain with Kundry. Their interaction begins with Parsifal learning his name from Kundry. This introduces one of the key elements of desire that Scruton identifies: the individualising thought. To Scruton, the proper name is significant because it acts as a unique identifier for the individual. More than just a label, it is a referential tool that isolates the individual and the essential consciousness that underlies them.⁵² This perspective explains why Parsifal is unable to engage in sexual desire until he learns his name and understands himself as an individual. This is followed by Kundry's exposition of his childhood, providing Parsifal with the full context of his past.⁵³ Through this, Parsifal develops an individual identity, unlike the nameless boy of Act I. The other element—embodiment—is introduced in the key transformative moment of the opera: Kundry's kiss. With this kiss, Parsifal suddenly understands Amfortas's suffering. Notably, Parsifal gains understanding on an internal, subjective level as he sees beyond Amfortas's wound and feels "burning in [his own] heart."⁵⁴ The subsequent music develops the *Heilandsklage*, thus connecting Parsifal, Amfortas and Christ.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., 299.

⁵¹ Ibid., 341.

⁵² Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, 76–78.

⁵³ This completes Kundry's earlier introduction of Parsifal's parents from Act I.

⁵⁴ Kienzle, "Parsifal and Religion," 124.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 124–25.

Interestingly, it is a physical action—the kiss—that catalyses Parsifal's spiritual awakening and enables his further development. While this initially seems paradoxical, it makes sense within the context of Scruton's philosophy. Sexual desire directs our focus towards another person, but this focus is mediated through the body. In particular, the kiss holds a special significance because of its focus on the face. Scruton argues that our subjectivity is embodied in our face, particularly through involuntary reactions. In the act of kissing, our individual subjectivities are united with one another.⁵⁶ Applied here, it is only by undergoing that physical process that Parsifal experiences the key components of sexual desire. It is this fact that relates the seemingly disparate phenomena of Kundry's kiss and Amfortas's suffering. Through an erotic encounter, Parsifal learns about personhood and develops the faculties of compassion, allowing him to fully empathise with Amfortas's inner experience.

This situation creates interesting parallels between Amfortas and Parsifal. Both men encounter Kundry, but their behaviour distinguishes them from one another. While Amfortas's indulgence led to his wound, Parsifal's encounter is clearly necessary for his development of compassion. However, unlike Amfortas, Parsifal ultimately rejects Kundry, and this renunciation appears essential for his success. How is this rejection to be understood?

Despite this apparent rejection of *érōs*, Parsifal's development has a more complicated telos that must be carefully examined. Scruton views Parsifal as a "hero of *agape*," the kind who "[renounces] their desires for the sake of others, and thereby [redeems] and [renews] the social order."⁵⁷ However, given the intricate picture of sexual desire painted thus far, we must resist viewing this rejection as a simple renunciation of sex altogether. As previously mentioned, the chaste community that began the opera is precisely the community that requires redemption. Instead, I argue that Parsifal rejects a particular form of sexual desire: Kundry's complicated nature—when analysed through Scruton's philosophy—reveals her to be the improper object of Parsifal's desire. Firstly, Kundry's character is merely one reincarnation of many, highlighted by Klingsor listing the myriad

⁵⁶ Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, 246.

⁵⁷ Scruton, *Death-devoted Heart*, 9.

names she has had.⁵⁸ At the beginning of Act II, Parsifal identifies Kundry as the “nameless one,” and in fact, it is unclear if Parsifal ever learns her name.⁵⁹ Especially given the significance of Parsifal’s name, Kundry appears to lack an individual, unique identity. More significantly, Kundry’s attitude towards sex overemphasises the body and neglects the spirit. Following Parsifal’s rejection, she repeatedly begs Parsifal to sleep with her, viewing it as her only means of salvation. This carnal focus is precisely what has corrupted those who have previously slept with her, particularly Amfortas. In Scruton’s parlance, Kundry’s relationship with sexuality is incomplete, as she only considers the physical body and fails to recognise the interpersonal project of sexuality. Thus, Kundry clearly embodies the most negative elements of sexual desire and must be denied.⁶⁰ This distinction is an important linchpin for my overall interpretation: Scruton’s philosophy of sex enables a more nuanced understanding of this scene’s message. For instance, Berger paints Kundry as being theologically unfit for redemption due to her sexuality.⁶¹ However, rather than being grounded in theology, my argument makes sense of Kundry’s negativity on sexual grounds. This argument, supported by Scruton’s philosophy, reveals how Kundry is more sophisticated than a mere avatar for sexual desire in general, as McGlathery suggests. Instead, much like Klingsor, she simply represents one type of sexual desire, one that is incomplete and objectified. This delineation ultimately paves the way for a more complex redemption.

Parsifal’s rejection of Kundry ultimately enables him to reconcile *eros* and *agape*, a crucial step towards resolving the problems presented thus far. After rejecting Kundry, Parsifal defeats Klingsor in a magical moment wherein the Spear hovers over his head. Once again, applying Scruton’s perspective on magic helps us to appreciate the significance of Parsifal’s supernatural feat. This moment represents his triumph over the misguided sexual desire that Klingsor epitomises. Indeed, I argue that this moment culminates the work’s drama, as Parsifal resolves the dichotomy established in the first act.

⁵⁸ This vagueness creates an effective parallel with the amorphous mass of flower maidens that Parsifal encounters at the start of the act, all of whom lacked a unique identity.

⁵⁹ Hans Küng, “Wagner’s *Parsifal*: A Theology for Our Time,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 23 (1984): 325.

⁶⁰ Bryan Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 162.

⁶¹ Berger, *Wagner Contra Nietzsche*, 334–35.

There, the repercussions of Klingsor's rejection of sex established chastity to be a meaningless gesture without prior temptation or knowledge. By contrast, Parsifal's renunciation is not based on the uncritical chastity rules of the Knights; his physical interaction with Kundry has granted him insight into the subjective element of *éros*. This full consciousness of the erotic allows for a more nuanced renunciation. When considered with his rejection of Kundry, Parsifal exhibits a more sophisticated chastity that understands the value of *éros*. Chastity—as conceived by Scruton—is ultimately meant to enable development, which Parsifal experiences in the Act III Prelude throughout his tumultuous journey back to Monsalvat. Crucially, Parsifal's transformation is intricately linked with his understanding of *éros* and compassion. As noted above, Parsifal rejects the objectified *éros* that only focuses on the body. Instead, Parsifal's newfound appreciation of personhood and subjectivity allows him to understand and treat others as embodied persons, thereby gaining compassion for Amfortas. For Scruton, interpersonal relationships are precisely what sacralise the physical world. His perspective explains why Parsifal is able to transcend the pre-existing paradigm and fulfil the prophecy.

Parsifal's development ultimately catalyses a particular form of redemption, one that closely aligns with Scruton's vision. Scruton defines redemption as "a regaining of the sacred in a world where sacrilege is the prevailing danger."⁶² This is dramatised in Act III, when the community's sacrilegious issues, epitomised by Klingsor, have been ameliorated. Parsifal returns as an external hero to redeem the Knights, beginning with the baptism of Kundry. Kundry's baptism catalyses the *Heilandsklage's* turn figure transformation into the Good Friday music, reflecting the redemption achieved through Christ's sacrifice. In Gurnemanz's sermon, he explains that the Redeemer is no longer seen on the cross, but the redemption he brings is only visible through the redeemed state of Man and Nature.⁶³ This presents us with a clear picture of redemption, which we see actualised in the main event of Act III: the final Communion scene. Although the Communion scene of Act III completes the opera's overall tri-partite structure, it features significant musical and dramatic changes from its Act I counterpart. Amfortas's disruption from Act I is mirrored by him exposing his wound, begging for death.

⁶² Scruton, *Death-devoted Heart*, 182.

⁶³ Kienzle, "Parsifal and Religion," 128.

However, this disruption is furthered by the intervention of Parsifal, who uses the Spear to heal Amfortas and resolve the existential dilemma it represented.⁶⁴ Structurally, this transforms the final Communion scene from an “asymmetrical arch” into a “teleological linear progression” with redemption as its goal. In Berger’s view, this transformation reflects the repair of Act I’s problems as the communion ceremony succeeds.⁶⁵ However, he offers no full account of the transformation that occurs, leaving his analysis incomplete. To supplement this, the earlier analysis of redemption is illuminating. The overall transformation of the Knights is reflected by Parsifal replacing Amfortas as the Grail King. Amfortas, the figure that parallels Christ, is replaced by Parsifal, a fully human figure. In fact, Wagner saw Christ as a perfect human rather than the son of a deity.⁶⁶ It is therefore fitting that Parsifal ultimately leads the Knights. This change is concluded by Parsifal’s declaration that the Grail be revealed at all times, thus eliminating the need for the Eucharistic celebration. The theologian Hans Küng views this final Communion scene as a reversal of Transubstantiation. Rather than bread becoming body, and wine becoming blood, it is the other way around. This has a humanising effect, a “grounding of the heavenly mysteries.”⁶⁷ Thus, Parsifal’s redemption regains the sacred for the Knights, but does so in a way that humanises it. Like Scruton’s conception of *agape*, Parsifal’s society only finds the sacred through human existence.

Given all this, *Parsifal* cannot be read as a simple renunciation of sex that reinforces the existing structure.⁶⁸ Instead, I argue that *Parsifal* must be read as Wagner’s recuperation of sexual desire to redeem this sacred community. Parsifal’s journey teaches him about *érōs* and its subjective components. This full understanding enables his nuanced renunciation of Kundry, and the overcoming of Klingsor. These events culminate in his compassion for Amfortas, the healing of his wound and the distinctively human telos of the final act’s redemption. By grasping the interpersonal nature of *érōs*, Parsifal successfully grounds the Knights’ *agape*, transforming it from a

⁶⁴ Berger, *Wagner Contra Nietzsche*, 305.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁶⁶ Kienzle, “*Parsifal* and Religion,” 109.

⁶⁷ Küng, “Wagner’s *Parsifal*,” 329–30.

⁶⁸ Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek, *Opera’s Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 173.

disembodied love into a wholly human one. Thus, Parsifal resolves the dichotomy between *éros* and *agape* by synthesising the two to redeem the unsustainable community. The opera's final line, "*Erlösung dem Erlöser*" ("Redemption for the Redeemer"), is accompanied by the Communion theme. However, unlike its initial iterations, it leads to a diatonic resolution and "sounds without a trace of suffering and lament for the first time."⁶⁹ Heard musically and represented dramatically, the opera's moral arc is completed, portraying the redemption of a religious community through human compassion.

Importantly, this interpretation of *Parsifal* also provides meaningful connections with the rest of Wagner's oeuvre. Specifically, *Parsifal*'s recuperation of *éros* links with the erotic love of *Tristan und Isolde* and ultimately redeems it. In *Tristan*, sexual desire leads to the lovers' death, a sacralising sacrifice that results from their inability to exist in this physical world.⁷⁰ This is catalysed by Tristan's spear wound, which parallels Amfortas's.⁷¹ In Scruton's view, the deaths of Tristan and Isolde take on a sacred, sacrificial role, turning their deaths into a monument that celebrates their subjectivity, ultimately uniting the two lovers in death. Notably, it is an entirely human endeavour, "redemption by [their] own devices and without the aid of a god."⁷² Rather than repudiating the erotic love of *Tristan*, *Parsifal* maintains the erotic as a fundamental element of human existence and resolves its unsustainability. Although *Parsifal* does not contain erotic love between two individuals, *éros* plays a central role in the opera's fundamental dilemma. In the beginning, Parsifal's ignorant chastity prevents him from resolving the Knights' problems. It is only by experiencing *éros* that Parsifal learns about personhood and compassion. Wagner ultimately redeems *éros* by presenting it as an essential ingredient for redemption, one that is integrated into our lives alongside *agape*. Properly understood, *éros* extends beyond individuals and enables the flourishing of *agape* in a sacred yet fully human society.

Overall, this understanding of the opera has numerous advantages over the alternatives explored earlier. Scruton's philosophy offers a comprehensive framework for studying the opera's primary concern: the fundamental dilemma between *éros* and *agape*. This enables a more

⁶⁹ Kienzle, "Parsifal and Religion," 129.

⁷⁰ Scruton, *Death-devoted Heart*, 147.

⁷¹ Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy*, 270.

⁷² Scruton, *Death-devoted Heart*, 183.

nuanced understanding of sexuality and religion and their various instantiations, both good and bad. This provides significant explanatory power when examining key dramatic moments in the opera. For instance, the rejection of Kundry's *érōs* suggests a wholesale rejection of sexuality, as outlined by McGlathery. However, Scruton's philosophy reveals that sexual desire is more complicated and does not simply fit into a good or bad dichotomy, thus paving the way for its redemption. Similarly, the Knights' *agape* represents a problem that is ultimately solved in the third act. However, this is often underexamined, as in Berger's analysis, or occurs with minimal explanation, as in McGlathery's interpretation. By contrast, my exegesis accounts for how Parsifal's experience with *érōs*, and his subsequent synthesis with *agape*, is crucial for the final act's redemption. Evidently, Scruton's nuanced philosophy enables a more sophisticated understanding of the work that tackles its two main themes with equal seriousness, as both are required to fully understand the work's complex message.

When exploring the opera's various themes of sexual desire, religion, compassion, and redemption, *Parsifal* emerges as a story in which *érōs* and *agape* are combined to achieve redemption. Properly understood, its themes are deeply relevant to our lives. It is in this sense that Parsifal is truly a *Bühnenweihfestspiel*: a stage-consecrating festival play. The Act I Prelude frames our attitudes towards the opera, leading us to experience the process of redemption and relate the opera's themes to our own lives—the epitome of *Kunstreligion*. The pitfalls of unbalanced *érōs* and *agape* are portrayed through a problematic religious community and its antagonist. Through *érōs*, Parsifal learns about the importance of the physical world and humanity's interpersonal relationship with one another. This teaches him compassion, enabling him to revivify *agape's* relevance for humanity and redeem his community. Crucially, this intricate process is evinced through Wagner's musical and dramatic treatment: musical material creates large-scale structures that are transformed throughout the opera's drama. By experiencing Wagner's final opera, we live through the deep message he perceived in religion: the construction of a sacred human society.

ABSTRACT

Richard Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*, is an enigmatic work that resists simple understanding both as an independent work and as a work

within Wagner's oeuvre. In particular, the themes of religion and sexuality are often addressed independently, resulting in vastly different interpretations. Religious readings focus on the redemption of the Knights and its theological significance, while sexual perspectives have focused on the overcoming of sexual desire. However, these partial perspectives lack sufficient explanatory power for the opera's overall message. Evidently, a full understanding of Wagner's ideas requires an integrated account of both religion and sexuality, one which Roger Scruton's philosophy provides. His post-Kantian philosophy extracts key ideas surrounding the role of erotic love, redemption, and the sacred for human existence and interaction. This article analyses *Parsifal* by utilising Scruton's framework to explore the opera's plot, characters, and music. Simultaneously addressing Wagner's treatment of erotic love and religion elucidates previously unexamined aspects of *Parsifal* and re-evaluates key elements of the work. Specifically, the interplay of *érōs* and *agape* prove to be the central dynamic of the work, which paves the way for its unique form of redemption. This sacred, yet fully human, redemption is evinced through Wagner's music and overall structure. Notably, this holistic interpretation also provides important links to Wagner's previous works, establishing a continuity that coherently positions *Parsifal* within Wagner's oeuvre. This new exegesis reveals a renewed *Parsifal* that concluded Wagner's development and completed the multiple threads he spent his whole life weaving.

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